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AN INTELLECTUAL EQUIVALENT OF “STUDENT ACTIVITIES”

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“STUDENT activities” is one of the charming paradoxes of the academic life and lingo. The phrase stands for those doings which college men plan and manage by and for themselves. In its classification is included all athletic sports, dramatic clubs, musical societies, debating teams, class contests of many sorts, fraternities, Young Men’s Christian Associations, and fun and sport of all kinds and conditions. The common characteristic of all these affairs is found in their origin and continuation in the students themselves, without specific or particular reference to college regulations or guardianship. Their executive relation, and not their intellectual, their communal fellowship, standing for coöperation of certain or all parts of the student body, represent the essential element. Initiative and creativeness, voluntariness and happy freedom, are parts of this undergraduate process. Comprehensively, “*This*,” the fellows say, “is college life.” It is a microcosm of life extramural. It is declared to be “the real thing!” “Latin—what have we to do with Horace’s Odes or Cicero’s Letters? No one writes like either of them today!” “Philosophy—what is that? Knowing nothing about nothing, and saying less!” “Greek—who cares for such an outlandish and antique thing as that? It is deader than a door-nail!” This life, it may be added, is really doing on a small field and by identical methods, in somewhat different materials and under unlike conditions, what one will do in the life subsequent to the academic days and years.

The attitude of the students themselves to these activities is most interesting and significant. For the majority it is an attitude of approbation, or participation, and of much happiness. To the formal scholar, the studious stu-

dent, they may not be of interest. But the formal scholar and the studious student is no longer the most general representative of the academic body. He is indeed the still small voice, the tender of the lamp, the priest at the altar of learning. But his devotion fails to command the respect, or to quicken the commendation, or to arouse the enthusiasm, once willingly given. One wishes that such were not the condition. One could, and does, desire that every student were a tender of the lamp, a priest at the altar, a prophet of scholarship. Perhaps some day a college may be founded which shall gather in such alien spirits.

The comprehensive question I wish to ask is, therefore: Can the interest which students now give to their own self-originating, self-administrative activities, be carried over to what the teachers of these students are still inclined to regard as their chief business? The question is rather serious. For, with full appreciation of the worth of the minor elements of a college education, the higher education cannot, will not, and ought not, to survive with these minor elements made major, and the major made minor.

The suggestion which I wish to offer in answer to the question is based upon the using of the creative and executive element in character—that element in fact which is most conspicuous and fundamental in the “activities”—as a more constant and formative method for reaching the mind of the student and for quickening that mind unto hard working. My meaning I can make clear by its application to specific studies. Let me apply my suggestion at once to that subject which possibly is of all subjects the least popular, to wit, mathematics. If it is the least popular, it is in certain respects the most important, not only because of the severity of its discipline, but also because of its relation to most scientific subjects. It is unpopular both because it demands profound and accurate thinking and also because it is by many regarded as utterly unpractical. It is said that mathematics has no relationship to what the student is going to do in life. Most of the mathematics taught in the undergraduate college is pure. My point is this, Can this pure mathematics be made applied? Can trigonometry, for instance, which, under a required system, is usually taken in the Freshmen year and which is hated by most members of that class, be at once applied to the problem of surveying fields, or of sailing ships? I have known Freshmen to study

trigonometry for eighteen weeks and to have no more idea of the purpose of sine, cosine, and logarithms, than they have of the weather fourteen years ahead. They might just as well have been learning Chinese characters as a means for quickening interest or securing power. If actual ships cannot be sailed—as they usually cannot—can certain actual lands be measured? Of course the lands can be measured, and the campus surveyed!

English, too, is a subject quite as common as mathematics in the Freshman year. The dislike of it is less deep and less general than of the severer subject. But it is so taught in that year as seldom to arouse enthusiasm. Cannot it be made to have the interest of the creative processes? There are three things which all graduates do. First, they talk constantly. Second, they write letters frequently. Third, they make an interpretation in writing of some force or method or event occasionally. These three things are pretty intimate to their life. Can teachers make courses in what are called “oral English” quickening to intellectual taste, formative of judgment, enlarging to sympathies? Can teachers so teach the writing of letters, either business for their succinctness or absolute clearness, or friendly for their charm, as to make these men believe that to write letters is one of the most precious results of education? Can teachers so oblige men to describe a football game, or a fire, or a chemical experiment, or the building or equipment of a biological laboratory, as to cause the undergraduate intellect to know and to feel that the power of interpretation is really worth gaining? One does not ask for letters like Byron’s, nor for interpretations like Huxley’s. But one does ask for writing just as good as this youth of nineteen can give.

Writing is taught in college altogether too much like Hegel’s philosophy, as a pistol shot out of pure space. It is so taught that it has little interest and small relationship. If the content were interesting and inspiring, the writing which embodies the content would be made also interesting and inspiring. Most students really have nothing to write, and, therefore, they write this nothing unto nothingness. If they had ideas, they would write these ideas with clearness and force, even if not with some sense of beauty. Therefore, our writing should be taught less by and for itself. It should be taught more and more as a part of every course in the college. It would be well to submit all papers in every other de-

partment to the English teachers for judgment and for criticism.

History, too, is a subject which has been made more interesting in recent years. Yet to many men it still seems remote and unrelated to present conditions and forces. The problem is, Can history be made to have the interest which the undergraduate activities possess? In answering this question one of my associates says:

"I believe in practical work for college students in history. But whatever I write now I write with fear and hesitation lest my suggestions should be exaggerated or misunderstood. . . . I have lived long enough to distrust radical reforms and to know that methods of teaching must take into account existing conditions, traditions and prejudices. It has seemed to me college authorities have it within their power to start a back-fire, so to speak, against the popular student activities which leave too little room for the real work of the college student. I think I can see why such activities are popular. They set the student to work in a practical way. He earns recognition from his fellows. In my view the problem of the college teacher, particularly of history, is to put the students to work in such a way that they will earn recognition by work as well as by play. Our handicap is that it takes longer to train a student to be a skilled worker in history than a successful athlete or manager of a student activity. The task is to harness and employ the energies and ambitions of students along practical and, wherever possible, productive lines, supplementary to the process of acquiring information. Red-blooded students unconsciously weary of merely listening and absorbing. The process is a prolonged one in these days of four-year high schools, almost colleges in methods and ideals. It would perhaps be treason to my profession to admit to the students that they had any business growing weary of learning. I fear they do.

"My suggestion is that ways be found to set them to work collecting sources of local history, assembling the sources for the study of special problems and exercises, and later in using these sources in arriving at conclusions, and still later in writing up these conclusions from the study of the sources into essays. Some of these essays may be selected for publication in the local periodicals. Probably only a few students would succeed in dealing successfully with the sources in the later stages, but such ones would have a recognition and a

satisfaction in having their work published. This plan seeks to combine three methods—the ripened views of the lecturer in the formal lecture, the reading of selected authorities, and, finally, the student practical exercises. . . . I see no reason why the plan will not be workable. However, it requires time to elaborate a technique and secure the means and equipment.” Thus, with wisdom and inspiration born of experience, writes Professor Benton.

“I shall not apply my proposal to every department of the college. But I may be suffered to seek to adjust it at least to one other field, and that is the field of the social sciences. In the great domain of government, of economics, of sociology, would it be possible for the heads of these departments to seek to make of the college an ideal commonwealth? A commonwealth republican, with bodies for legislative, judicial and executive functions, a state under which all forms and processes of government should be made plain, impressive, and quickening to the student-citizen. Would it be feasible for the principles and the methods, the conditions and the forces, the difficulties, the causes and the results, which government stands for, to be made a part of his studies and of his life? Of course, such an intimation represents a big and complex job. It is a job, however, most worthy of prolonged and profound consideration.”

Regarding the proposition to which I thus give a bare outline, I wish to make two remarks in conclusion. First, this suggestion is not designed to serve that select group of students whose primary interests are already intellectual. They can be, and are, approached directly and immediately through their minds. It is designed to serve that large body whose primary interests are not intellectual, but whose minds should be quickened and enlarged in great human relationships. If, for the select group, the will and character are approached through the intellect, for the larger number the intellect is to be approached through the will. My second remark is that the application of this method would lay untried methods and conditions upon many teachers. In the use of such methods and conditions, teachers would need to exercise great patience with themselves and with their students, and possibly their students, too, would not be entirely free from the need of exercising a similar virtue and grace toward their teachers.

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